

The *SBJT* Forum: Key Points in the ECT Debate

Editor's note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. Thomas J. Nettles, James White, Mark Dever, and John Armstrong have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: Are there historical precedents to encourage hope that evangelical/Roman Catholic dialogue might have positive results?

Thomas J. Nettles: No one can rule out the possibility, given the power of the gospel, that honest dialogue might benefit the individuals involved. This was the case in the Reformation when Luther defended and expanded his views in the early attempts of the Papacy to bring him to recantation. Notably, the Dominican, Martin Bucer, came under the influence of Luther and embraced the gospel at the Heidelberg Disputation in 1518. After that his zeal for reformation and his influence for the leading principles of the Reformation were immense. Hopefully, some of the Roman Catholics might be led to believe the gospel in the same way.

The best chance for the success of this kind of dialogue in the Reformation occurred during the colloquies of the sixteenth century. A *Colloquy*, as distinct from a *Confutatio* or disputation which aims at victory and an imputation of heresy to one's opponents, focuses on friendly discussion with a view of achieving conciliation. The concept of the colloquy developed at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530 when Melancthon objected to a "devilish"

strategy of John Eck. Eck sought to fix on reformation churches extremist positions he had culled from a number of reformation writings and have those churches denounced as heretical should they not be able successfully to defend those ill-conceived positions. Due to Melancthon's counter strategy, the colloquies used the Augsburg confession as a basis for the discussion.

The participants, appointed by Charles V and including theologians as well as civil rulers, agreed on fifteen articles after brief discussion. On issues such as the doctrine of God, the Son of God, baptism, civil government and the return of Christ they found little reason to dispute. Surprisingly, brief discussion brought substantial agreement on such issues as justification and the freedom of the will. The colloquy at Worms, 1540, brought about agreement concerning the original integrity of humanity in its creation, the cause of sin, and original sin. The agreement included John Eck's explanation that "in baptism the guilt of original sin together with all sins is forgiven through the merits of Christ."

Regensburg of 1541 had the most ambitious agenda and historically advantageous opportunity of all the colloquies.

Thomas J. Nettles has served as Professor of Historical Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary since 1997. He has taught previously at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (1976-1982), Mid-America Seminary (1982-1988), and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (1989-1997). Dr. Nettles is a prolific author and has written extensively about Baptist history.

At Regensburg, twenty-three articles underwent close scrutiny. Further developments in Reformed thought, particularly through the influence of Calvin's *Institutes*, brought into question the legitimacy of some of the former areas of agreement. Justification was up for discussion again. A carefully worded article on justification gained agreement from many of the participants from both sides. The Roman Catholic participants wanted to avoid the libertarianism they inferred from the Protestant doctrine, while the Protestants wanted to avoid the merit theology they inferred from the Romanists. "The sinner is justified," they agreed, "by a living and effectual faith, for through such faith we will be acceptable to God and accepted for the sake of Christ." Though the participants sought to avoid language that would obscure differences, their efforts to address a commonly held matter, justification, in language emptied of partisan polemics failed to please enough people. In the end, the carefulness of the wording seemed to hide the distinctive assumptions essential for honest theological formulation. Lutheran princes rejected the final document because it implied a slander on the Augsburg Confession; Rome rejected it because it lent itself to different interpretations.

Another important consideration for Baptists in these discussions is that the Zwinglian understanding of the Lord's Supper gained no adherents. All participants conceded that the Anabaptist view of baptism as an ordinance for believers, symbolic and non-sacramental in character, should be rejected as heretical. Baptists are much further from Rome than other evangelicals on ecclesiology and the character of the ordinances. Paedobaptists

of all sorts will come closer to Rome more quickly than historic Baptists; the gravitational pull of paedobaptism always is toward sacramental efficacy. Like Bilbo Baggins's ring, it is restless till it reunites with its owner.

Hopes for amicable discussion and acceptance as equal partners in dialogue ended with the spirit of anathematization that dominated the Council of Trent. By January 1547, the council's longest decree, the one concerning justification, occupied the attention of the theologians. Consisting of sixteen chapters and thirty-three canons of anathema, the decree condemned reformation theology and crystallized the Roman system. Although Protestants agreed with several points of both affirmation and condemnation, the theologians of Trent specifically and emphatically rejected the distinctive doctrine of justification by faith alone by the imputed righteousness of Christ alone. Having earlier, in session four, embraced a dual source of authority including Scripture and unwritten tradition and a single source of authoritative interpretation, "Holy Mother Church," little room for discussion remained but only the necessity of isolating and condemning any views that threatened their laboriously contrived doctrinal hegemony. For them justification includes "the sanctification and renewal of the inward man" by which faith cooperates with good works so that believers "increase in that justice received through the grace of Christ and are further justified." "If anyone says," so goes canon eleven, "that men are justified either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ or by the sole remission of sin, to the exclusion of the grace and the *charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost. . .*, let him be anath-

ema." Likewise canon twenty-four says, "If anyone says that the justice received is not preserved and also not increased before God through good works, but that those works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but not the cause of its increase, let him be anathema."

While the Protestants emphasized the necessity of sanctification and defined carefully the nature of saving faith as a holy and lively faith that works, they refused to admit any of these works, even the holiest, into the arena of justification. The righteousness that justifies is constituted solely by the obedience of Christ. If we are instructed to trust in any degree of our sanctification for the matter of justifying righteousness, we must count our instructors as soul-destroyers. Moreover, we denigrate the full satisfaction of Christ's work and dishonor the Law of God by settling for a standard less than un failing, perpetual, and absolute obedience as constituting true righteousness.

The narrowing process continued with subsequent developments such as the *Syllabus of Errors*, Vatican I (that constituted the doctrine of papal infallibility as dogma), and the increase in Mariolatry in establishing such dogmas as the *Immaculate Conception* and the *Bodily Assumption*. John Paul II, in harmony with the spirit of Vatican II, has removed the atmosphere of anathema and has given an attractive congeniality to the papal persona, but, understandably, remains entirely consistent with historic Roman doctrine. In *Dominus Iesus* he asserts with elegance that the church constitutes a salvific mystery; Christ's salvation comes by means of the Church. This saving church subsists in "the Catholic Church, governed by the Successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him." Other ecclesial

communities "not yet in full communion with the Catholic Church" have elements of sanctification in them through apostolic succession, baptism, and a valid eucharist. Their refusal to submit to the papal primacy, which "the Bishop of Rome objectively has and exercises over the entire Church" interrupts their full communion with the true Catholic church. Baptists and like-minded ecclesial communities, are not churches in "the proper sense," and only because they practice baptism are they in a certain, albeit imperfect, communion with the Church. Though one may be impressed with the congeniality of his expressions in the declaration, the Pope's ecclesiastical sacramentalism does not raise confidence in the "evangelical" integrity of the gospel he propounds. None of the three marks mentioned by John Paul II, the succession of bishops, baptismal regeneration, and the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, do Baptists view as having any power for salvation or as in any sense a mark of the true church.

Though the present dialogue recognizes with candor that several, in fact many, "differences and disagreements . . . must be addressed more fully," the rather blunt assertion that "Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ" (13) begs the question. Recognition that historic Catholicism and historic Protestantism maintain Christian theism, trinitarianism, and Christology does not get to the heart of the question, "What is a Christian?" Though the dialoguers encountered a "major difference in our understanding of the relationship between baptism and the new birth," this did not seem to hinder the full confidence that both types of belief constituted saving faith. The issue of salvation brought

on the Reformation and is the clearest distinctive between Protestants and Catholics. Success in the discussion can only mean that evangelicals have compromised doctrinally, minimized the importance of the issue, or so muddled the vocabulary that no one can really be certain about what is affirmed.

The agreement on “Witness” seems to have incorporated a bit of all three of these ominous possibilities. Evangelism, infelicitously labeled “Proselytization” or “sheep stealing” or “recruiting people from another community for the purposes of denominational or institutional aggrandizement,” (52) of Catholics is “neither theologically legitimate nor a prudent use of resources” (53). How stupid of Calvin to send preachers into France to die for the sake of preaching the gospel to those who should be considered “brothers and sisters in Christ.” We are now to believe that this was denominational aggrandizement. How misguided and how imprudent Southern Baptists have been in seeking to evangelize in Mexico, Central America, and South America when any supposed conversions were not conversions at all but just submission to the pressures of “proselytization.” Evangelism in Brazil really amounts only to “sheep stealing” according to the enlightened progress made in evangelical/Catholic dialogue.

If the historical development of ideas has discernible meaning, dialogue cannot bridge the gap that is fixed. Evangelicals and Catholics must remain antagonists on the issue of the gospel, no matter how many other cultural and political issues may provide common ground. As long as this antagonism remains, and the weapons of our warfare are spiritual, conversion remains a distinct possibility. If the

dialogue capitulates to post-modern relativism in which neither words nor history have communicable meaning, conversion becomes impossible. In losing our antagonists, we would lose the gospel.

SBJT: What is the chief theological issue standing between Roman Catholics and evangelicals?

James White: While the most important division between Roman Catholics and evangelicals concerns the gospel itself (justification by grace through faith alone versus Rome’s sacramental system that mediates grace and makes baptism the initial means of justification), a more fundamental issue is authority. All discussions with Rome regarding justification, grace, faith, sacraments, purgatory, indulgences, or any other relevant issue, boil down, in the final analysis, to the authority claims of Rome, which clash directly with the authority claims of the written Word, the Scriptures.

Nothing substantive has changed since the Reformation. Just as the “material” principle of the Reformation was justification by faith alone, so too the “formal” principle was *sola scriptura*, the ability and sufficiency of the Scriptures to function as the sole *infallible* rule of faith for the Church. The changes since the Council of Trent (1546-1564) are cosmetic in nature: Rome is not nearly as strident in her official language and posture. Meanwhile non-Catholics have become distracted by a myriad of other issues, so that precious few are *passionate* about the very basis of their theology and proclamation. And why should they? Surveys show that the door still swings widely away from Rome and toward evangelicalism, especially in traditionally Catholic ethnic groups, such as among Hispanics. Does it not make

James White is the Director of Alpha and Omega Ministries, which he founded with Michael Beliveau in 1983. He is Scholar in Residence at Grand Canyon University and is an adjunct professor at the Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary’s Arizona Campus. Dr. White has written numerous books, including works on Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witnesses, the King James translation, and Roman Catholicism.

sense to be conciliatory and non-offensive, given that the battle really does not seem to be taking place on this portion of the battlefield any longer?

In reality, the battle rages on, whether the majority of those on both sides are intent upon ignoring it or not. Entire divisions of the respective armies may be away on theological retreats, but that does not mean the battle has been decided. Roman Catholic apologists have launched a counter-offensive that is often effective because the average evangelical is unprepared to defend the need to ground one's beliefs in the Scriptures *alone*. Assuming that their nominal Roman Catholic neighbors represent the entirety of Catholic experience, many an evangelical has been blindsided by the zealous Catholic witness who challenges them to demonstrate their belief in *sola scriptura* from Scripture itself. Throw in a few challenging passages (2 Thess 2:15, Matt 23:1-2) and a handful of normally context-less citations from ancient Christian writers, and many find themselves far outside their element.

Over the past decade, no less than five works explicitly attacking the doctrine of *sola scriptura* have been widely distributed. One of these, a collection of essays by various authors, exceeds six hundred pages. While they all lack serious exegetical and historical merit, such that the biblical exegete and historian can detect numerous cases of question-begging and simple anachronism, their potential impact on their target audience—evangelicals in the pew—is immeasurable. Their explicitly stated desire is to remove the evangelical's confidence in the sufficiency of Scripture, outside of an infallible Magisterium with access to "divine tradition" (however that is defined), and replace it with an equally implicit trust in

the infallible authority of Rome, headed, they claim, by the direct successor of Peter in Rome.

It is not as if these claims of Rome have not been dealt with dozens of times in the past. Yet the average evangelical is hard-pressed to locate a copy of Whitaker's *Disputations on Holy Scripture* or Goode's *The Divine Rule of Faith and Practice*, even if they knew to look for such monumental works. Thankfully, modern authors have taken up the cause, and the recent publication of the Webster & King three-volume work, *Holy Scripture, the Ground and Pillar of Our Faith*, fills a major need. Yet, surely one will not find this work sitting next to the *Left Behind* series on the best-selling charts at the local Christian bookstore. Many pastors are likewise unaware of available resources. It is thus vital that sound teaching be maintained in our seminaries and colleges.

There may well be another reason for the decline in the zealous belief, defense, and propagation of *sola scriptura*. This doctrine presupposes the *highest* view of Scripture itself, which view has been eroded in much of Protestantism in the wake of the rise of modernistic liberalism. Those who do not believe that Scripture is *theopneustos* will hardly be in a position to defend its sufficiency to guide Christ's Church as the very embodiment of His voice and authority in her midst. It falls, then, to a narrower spectrum of "evangelicals" to engage the battle and once again defend and establish the supremacy of Scripture in matters of faith and doctrine. To believe that God speaks in Scripture literally demands that one then cannot remain silent when other alleged "voices" are offered to the Christian people. *Sola scriptura* is the logical and necessary continuation of our affirmation

of the inspiration and authority of God's Word.

Rome's denial of the sufficiency of the Scriptures, coupled with her claim to possess "apostolic tradition" within the context of an "infallible magisterium" creates a *de facto* position of *sola ecclesia*, the Church as the final and sole authority. This is the foundational apologetic issue between evangelicals and Roman Catholics, and there is no evidence that Rome intends to abandon her claims regarding tradition. We must, then, continue to defend the life-blood of biblical theology, *sola scriptura*.

SBJT: What is the biblical doctrine of imputation and why is it important?

Mark Dever: Through his Word, God teaches us that sometimes he accounts the guilt or righteousness of one to another. This is called imputation. And, in no small part, the Reformation was all about clarifying this very point. If you don't understand imputation, you don't understand the evangelical faith. A failure to grasp the biblical doctrine of imputation is a failure to grasp the gospel.

The Hebrew family of words *hsb* meaning to reckon, account, affirm or consider was sometimes translated "impute" in the Authorized Version. We find the idea most clearly in Genesis 15:6 when Abram believed God and God *credited* (or *counted*, AV) it to him as righteousness. This is the *locus classicus* for the Bible's teaching of imputation. Here we clearly see God observing Abram's trust in God's word of promise, and counting it, imputing it to Abram as righteousness.

Again, David in Psalm 32:2 celebrates the condition of being one "unto whom the LORD imputeth not iniquity" (AV). While the NIV and ESV have decided to

render this by the simpler idea of "count" (as the AV did in Genesis), the RSV/NRSV family has kept the older language of imputation. Either word conveys the idea.

In the Septuagint and in the New Testament, the idea of imputation is expressed in the Greek word *logizomai*. In the New Testament *logizomai* occurs 40 times, almost half being citations from the OT (i.e., the LXX). And the meaning is again to account or reckon.

Paul most frequently uses this word in Romans, especially in chapter 4 where he gives an extended meditation on Abraham as the father of our faith. Taking Genesis 15:6 as his springboard, Paul considers how it is that "when a man works, his wages are not *credited* to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is *credited* as righteousness" (Rom 4:4-5). Paul proceeds to cite Psalm 32:2, saying that David was also an example of a blessed man because his faith was credited to him as righteousness. Or, to say it in another way, righteousness is imputed when believers are "fully persuaded that God has power to do what he had promised. This is why 'it was credited to him as righteousness.' The words 'it was credited to him' were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (Rom 4:21-24).

This biblical teaching about imputation is important for us as Christians in a number of ways, most significantly, in our understanding of our sin, Christ's atonement, and our justification. Let's look at those each briefly in turn.

Mark Dever is pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D. C. A graduate of Cambridge University, Cambridge, England, he is the author of *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* and a recent book on Richard Sibbes. He is a contributing editor to *The Founders Journal*.

Imputation Important in Understanding Our Sins

The Bible's teaching on imputation affects how we understand our sins. In what sense are humans sinful? Are we sinful only because of our own sins? Are we sinful only because of our own sinful nature? Or, is the sin of Adam actually accounted our sin? Are we punished for Adam's sin?

According to the Bible, Adam's sin is actually imputed to us. Romans 5:12 says, "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned . . ." So through Adam's sin we all sinned (*hēmarton* is in the aorist and suggests a past completed action). Again, in Romans 5:19 we find that "through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners . . ." Both the inclination to sin and the guilt of Adam's sin are part of what Christians have traditionally called "original sin." Imputation has to do not with the corruption, but only with the guilt of Adam's sin being put to our account. Commenting on this verse Douglas Moo has said that "Adam, like Christ, was a corporate figure, whose sin could be regarded at the same time as the sin of all his descendants."¹ That this doctrine is offensive to many is clear. That it is biblical seems equally clear.

The imputation of Adam's sin to us is very significant. If God the Father views Adam's sin as belonging to us, then it does! In fact, this is how Paul explains the universality of death—it is because of our first father's sin. That everyone born dies proves that everyone has been implicated in Adam's sin. How much more amazing does this make Christ's love for us? He died for us "while we were yet sinners"

(Rom 5:8), and that includes those of us alive today as well, for he regarded us, too, as sinners in Adam. How fruitless does this make our questions about the possibility of salvation apart from the gospel of Christ? We don't need to look for people who are perfect, or devise theories about "good pagans who have never heard" because by definition (apart from Jesus Christ) no one is born in this fallen world who is finally and fully good. We are all willing co-conspirators in Adam's rebellion.

Imputation Important in Understanding Christ's Atonement

The Bible's teaching on imputation also affects how we understand Christ's atonement. How could Christ bear the penalty for our sins? What could our sins have to do with his death?

According to the Bible, our sins are imputed to Christ. The cross of Christ was obviously a place of great physical suffering. We also understand from our Lord's crying out in the words of Psalm 22:1 (cf. Mark 15:34; Matt 27:46) that God the Father in some mysterious way forsook God the Son. To speak of such high and holy, such deep and tender issues requires the greatest of circumspection and care on our part, but it seems clear that in some way the full fellowship between Father and Son was interrupted.

But why was it so? It was so because "the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. . . . He bore the sin of many" (Isa 53:6, 12). What did it mean for Jesus Christ to "bear" sins that were not his own, that he had not committed? It means that our sins were imputed to him so that Paul could even say under inspiration that the Incarnate Son of God was made to be sin (2 Cor 5:21), and that he became a curse

for us (Gal 3:13). As Peter says “He Himself bore our sins in his body on the tree,” (1 Pet 2:24). God declared that our sins belonged to Christ, and so they did. He, in mercy and grace, accounted our sins to Christ—our voluntary Lamb of God who willingly offered his life for us—and so he was liable for our punishment.

If the imputation of Adam’s sin to us is significant, how much more so the imputation of our sins to Christ. Christ’s sufferings were not endured for himself—they were borne for us. As such, they both demonstrate his love and effect our deliverance, either one of which are tremendous reasons for us to praise God for this divine transference! Never has justice been sweeter than when God ordained to love us so!

Imputation Important in Understanding Our Justification

Finally, the Bible’s teaching on imputation also affects how we understand our own justification. Are we justified because of our own righteousness? Is our faith ultimately the only substitute that God accepts for righteousness? How are we related to Christ in justification?

The Bible teaches that even as Adam’s sins are imputed to us, and our sins are imputed to Christ, so Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us. God reckons us as righteous. And here we return to Paul’s discussion of Abraham’s faith in Romans 4, and his citation of Psalm 32:2. This is why the righteousness we possess as Christians is called a “free gift” (Rom 5:17). God reckons Christ’s righteousness to us. So just as imputation has been at the heart of the Bible’s teaching about original sin and Christ’s atonement, so it is also at the core of understanding our justification.

This is why Paul calls Christ “our righteousness” (1 Cor 1:30; cf. Phil 3:9). This is the most shocking demonstration of the depths of the love of a holy God for sinners. We read in Romans 4:5, “And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness.” This One who justifies the ungodly, is the thrice-holy God! “Holy, holy, holy” is said only about this One (Isa 6:3; Rev 4:8). And it is this Holy One who justifies not those who are made righteous through the infusion of grace (as the Church of Rome teaches) but those who are still ungodly, but who believe. This is the difference that gave us the Protestant Reformation, and this is one significant obstacle to any reuniting of Protestant and Roman Catholic churches.

The significance of Christ’s righteousness being imputed to the believer is incalculable. If it were not so, you and I would be consigned to perdition, eternally lost. But if his righteousness is accounted to us, then we have been ransomed, as the Lord Jesus said he came to do (Mark 10:45; Matt 20:28). For you to be so ransomed, for you to be saved from the penalty of your sins, there is no way but the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to you, O believer.

So, is the Bible’s teaching on imputation important? It is as important as the salvation of your soul, and as the glory of the God who saves by so accounting us righteous. For your own soul’s sake, for Christ’s sake, for God’s sake, study and teach this precious doctrine of God’s just accounting of us as sinners, of our sins to Christ, and of Christ’s righteousness to us.

ENDNOTES

¹Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (New International Commentary on the

New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 328.

SBJT: The Roman Catholic Church has consistently maintained that she is *the catholic church*. For this reason other Christians, or what Vatican II called “separated brethren,” can share union with Christ through the mystery of Rome’s life. How do you respond to Rome’s claim regarding her exclusive claim to “catholicity”?

John Armstrong: I believe we must first understand the meaning of the historic word *catholic*. Sadly, evangelicals are often uncomfortable with the word. Some have even deleted the term when reciting the *Apostles’ Creed* by substituting the word “Christian” for *catholic*. This change makes no sense. The framers of the earliest creeds, both the *Apostles Creed* and the *Nicene Creed*, conceived of no other church than the Christian church!

Strictly speaking the Greek word *katholikos* means “general.” The term refers to “what is encompassed by the whole.” By the second century Ignatius of Antioch, a post-apostolic church father, used this word to refer to that from which certain heretics departed. The term was also widely used to refer to the visible church that was both orthodox, in holding to the doctrine of the apostles, and universal, in its missionary purpose. The idea that the term refers only to geographical universality misses an important point. The term *catholic* came to mean a *quality* that exists intrinsically in the church itself, not simply a specific, or universal, presence. The range of meanings found in the first few centuries does not allow *limiting* catholic to a single expression of the church in one place, or to a particular expression of church govern-

ment. This is especially true with regard to one group of churches existing under the rule of one bishop, or a pope. From the earliest biblical and post-apostolic usage, the word “catholic” referred to the reality of Christ’s spiritual body that took expression in a visible form wherever the orthodox Christian faith was truly confessed and practiced. Every church (or congregation) that confessed the ancient faith of the apostles (as revealed in Holy Scripture) was understood to be part of this holy catholicity, distinctly created by the Holy Spirit. (This is why the two earliest creeds, in their Trinitarian approach, both link catholicity to the work of the Holy Spirit!)

Furthermore, the catholicity of the church must be understood in the light of both the Old and New Testaments. The “little flock” (Luke 12:32) to whom Jesus first revealed the special nature of his kingdom were the Jewish inheritors of an ancient hope and of distinct biblical promises. Their hope was earthly and physical—a land, a temple and a distinct future. Jesus demonstrated again and again that these realities were united with the one who has now called his people to be one flock, one holy church. All the promises of God belonged to this church. The redemption of the earth, in this unfolding *historia salutis*, was now understood in terms of Christ’s life and death, Christ’s resurrection, Christ’s ascension and heavenly intercession, and Christ’s coming judgment and the final establishment of his universal kingdom. All who were in Christ were “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” (1 Pet 2:9). The evidence of Scripture, as well as the evidence of extra-canonical writing from the early church, is clear: the first readers of the

John Armstrong is a former pastor of more than 20 years, editor of the *Reformation & Revival Journal*, seminar and conference speaker both in the United States and abroad, and director of Reformation & Revival Ministries. Dr. Armstrong has authored or edited several works including *The Compromised Church* (1998) and *Reforming Pastoral Ministry* (2001).

New Testament considered the church to be *the people of God*—a multi-ethnic, multi-racial, pluriform fellowship of people “purchased for God with [Christ’s] blood from every tribe, and language and people and nation” (Rev 5:9).

Thus this idea of catholicity was widely stressed in the early decades after Christ’s ascension. There is no serious doubt, unless one falls into one of several historical errors that crop up in history (e.g., Landmarkism among the Baptists), that the New Testament speaks *not* only of particular congregations as the church but of *all* congregations as the church (cf. Ephesians 2-4). Clearly each local church is related vertically to its head, Christ; however, each local church is also related to one another horizontally because of the union believers have with Christ. (This is most clearly evident in John 17.) This pattern is also seen in the letters and writings of important early theologians and ordinary believers, as statements from several early church documents reveal.

Yet this concept of biblical catholicity was challenged even in the earliest days of the church. To an important degree we might say it was lost, or at least confused, as early as the third century. In the light of Ephesians 2:11-22, and the clearly revealed plan of God to make both Jews and Gentiles into “one new man,” we see the intention and design of God’s redemption. As the church expanded into new social and geographical areas it took cultural forms that strengthened its missionary resolve and yet at the same time some of these same forms worked against the church’s inherent catholicity. Both Christopher Dawson, in his classic *The Making of Europe*, and Mike Kelly, in his insightful work *The Impulse of Power*, have argued that by the third and fourth cen-

tures the church at Rome was consciously imitating the organizational structure of the collapsing Roman Empire. The “new” Rome they desired was to be ecclesiastical rather than political. The bishops of the church were “good patriots” who saw the obvious defects of a pagan Rome. They held out hope that the Roman Church would become an “imperial” replacement. Since empires require emperors, the doctrine of the papacy was eventually needed to guide the effort. In spite of the pattern seen in Acts 15, where amazing efforts were made to preserve the visible unity of the church’s catholicity, a few centuries after these biblical high points cultural, rather than biblical, patterns began to determine church practice. Sadly, by forfeiting a biblical response to the Jews after 70 A.D., the church lost another vital element of the visible expression of its inherent catholicity even before the end of the first century.

What then happened to the earliest concept of catholicity? It underwent development and change. No one seriously questions this. Rome claims that these changes were a necessary part of what constituted the “holy catholic church” in its development of dogma and its essential essence. By this argument Rome further insists that she alone is the *catholic* church. Why? Because she alone has *historical* continuity with the *hierarchical* organization that eventually developed in the ancient city of Rome. (By this means she leaves out the churches of the East as well as all non-Roman Catholic churches in the West!) Shifts that came in the second and third centuries are noteworthy. Ignatius, the third bishop of Antioch, is sometimes cited in this debate because he equated the presence of a bishop with the presence of Christ in a congregation. (Clearly the

sub-apostolic leaders of the church in the second and third centuries were concerned that truth could be twisted in many directions by false teachers, a doctrine itself contained in the New Testament.) Ignatius's quote regarding the church has been stretched in many directions. The danger is that tradition reads into these statements ideas that were only widely *developed* by the third and fourth centuries. What Ignatius plainly does *not* do is correlate the work of bishops with that of apostles, a conclusion reached several centuries later. This conclusion now stands solidly behind Rome's claim to be *the catholic* church because she alone has continuous union with the bishop of Rome and the magisterium, and through the bishop and the magisterium, with the apostles and Christ.

What Ignatius does say is that "wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church" *not* "where the bishop is there is the church." Certainly, he could not conceive of a church without a bishop (a presbyter or pastor) since he believed a bishop was necessary for the worship of a well-ordered congregation. He does not, however, ground the catholicity of the church in bishops, but in the presence of Christ by Word and sacrament.

It is my conviction that the truth of catholicity was meant to underscore the wholeness of the church, both apostolicity in doctrine and holiness in practice. Forms of government were simply *not* the issue in the early concept of *catholicity*. (This does not mean forms of government are irrelevant or unimportant for a local church today.) The fullness of the church is properly understood as inherent in the fullness of Christ, because of the vital union that exists between Christ and his flock. The church, as a specific congrega-

tion in local expression, and as a collection of congregations making up the whole body of Christ visibly represented in the earth, expresses this catholicity when it grows into the fullness of Christ, both in doctrine and practice. Conrad Bergendoff notes: "To identify the catholicity of the Church with a form of government of the third century is to make of a means an end, and to raise to an absolute place what is a relative form."¹ For this reason I do not believe Rome is correct to claim that she alone expresses catholicity in the earth. This claim is far too narrow, far too limited and far too sectarian to be rooted in either the world of the Bible or that of the earliest creeds and confessions of the Christian Church.

ENDNOTES

¹Conrad Bergendoff, *The One Holy Catholic Apostolic Church* (Rock Island, IL: The Augustana Book Concern, 1954) 64.